

The Greek Verb

There are two important elements in the study of the Greek verb:

1. function — the different types of information conveyed by specific forms of the verb
2. morphology — how the different forms of the verb are constructed

Function

The verb in Greek does a great deal more work than in English. Thus, for example, Greek does not as a rule use many helping words: the form of the verb itself conveys information that in English is conveyed via the addition, e.g., of pronouns and of words such as “will,” “might,” “could,” “was,” etc. (As we will find, Greek also has a habit of using strong verbs with weak objects — or with the object implied by the verb — whereas today’s popular English often favors weak verbs with emphatic objects.)

The most basic distinction to master in studying the Greek verb is that between the **finite forms** and **the infinitive**.

[The term “finite” means “defined,” “bounded,” “limited,” and is derived from the Latin *finis* (“boundary”). The “in-finitive,” by contrast, is the “unbounded” or “undefined” form.]

The “unbounded” or **infinitive form** (which our book deals with in Unit 3) presents the action of the verb as an abstract concept: “to love,” “to dream,” “to die.” (As you can see, in English the infinitive is indicated by the use of the word “to.”) Technically speaking, this form of the verb provides no reference to a particular time, nor does it indicate anything about whether one person is to be imagined as undertaking the action or many, whether the act is to be imagined as actually occurring or merely possible, etc.; the infinitive points to the act in the abstract. (As a result, the infinitive is, properly speaking, a **verbal noun**.)

The “defined” or **finite form of the verb**, by contrast, conveys very specific information about a particular act, event, etc. It is the finite form of the verb that we will be studying first.

The finite form of the verb typically conveys five separate items of information, which can be divided into the following categories:

1. person — whether the action is presented as being undertaken by the speaker him/herself, perhaps in company with others (1st person: Engl. “I,” “we”); by an individual or group who is being addressed directly (2nd person: Engl. “you”); or by a person or group whom the speaker is not addressing directly (3rd person: Engl. “he,” “she,” “it,” “they”)
2. number — whether a single individual is presented as engaging in the activity (the singular), or a group of people (the plural) [the difference, e.g., between “I” and “we,” or between “she” and “they”]
3. tense/aspect — when the action is thought of as having occurred (in the present, the future, or the past) and just how the action is imagined as occurring (e.g., is it simply stated as having occurred [“I ran”] or as something that was on-going [“I was running”])
4. mood — whether the action is stated as a fact (the indicative mood), as a command (the imperative mood), or as something that might happen, that generally can be said to happen, that the speaker wishes could happen or is afraid might happen, that the speaker urges or pleads with another to do, or that is in some way contingent upon something else (the subjunctive and optative moods)
5. voice — whether the action is performed actively by the subject (the active voice), is done to the subject (the passive voice), or is somehow performed by the subject in his/her own interest or upon him/herself (the middle voice)

It will be important that you develop the habit of recognizing these five elements of the various finite verbs that you translate: this process (i.e., the identification of a particular form's person, number, tense, mood, and voice) is known as **parsing**.

Person

- 1st person
- 2nd person
- 3rd person

There is relatively little to say about this element of the verb. Notice, however, that Greek does not generally make use of pronouns. I.e., the Greek for "I loose" is λύω; for "he/she/it loves" is φιλεῖ.

In the third person, in particular, this means that the reader has to supply a subject ("he," "she," "it," "they") from the particular context if one is not expressly stated; if a subject is stated, it is automatically plugged in as the subject of the verb. Thus:

- φιλεῖ = "he/she/it loves" [depending on the context]
- ὁ Δικαιόπολις φιλεῖ = "Dicaeopolis loves" [*not* "Dicaeopolis, he loves"]

Number

- singular
- plural

Again, there is relatively little to say about this element of the verb. Notice that Greek, however, also has a separate dual form, for when two paired items are presented as the subject of the verb. These forms are not common and can often be recognized merely from the context (a pair of hands, a team of oxen, etc.). They are not introduced in our textbook.

Tense/Aspect

- present
- future
- imperfect
- aorist
- perfect
- future perfect
- pluperfect

Tense

The Greek tenses are very like those in English, with some added wrinkles. We will deal with each tense in greater detail as it is formally introduced, but the following forms of the English verb "I love" reflect common uses (via their English equivalents):

- present tense: "I am loving," "I love," "I do love"
- future tense: "I will be loving," "I will love"
- imperfect tense: "I was loving," "I used to love," "I was beginning to love," "I was attempting to love"
- aorist tense: "I loved"
- perfect tense: "I have loved"
- future perfect tense: "I will have loved"
- pluperfect tense: "I had loved"

Aspect

One problem with the tenses in Greek is that they also incorporate another element: aspect. The aspect of a verb concerns just how the action is regarded as occurring. There are three aspects in Greek:

- **progressive aspect:**¹ presents the action as on-going or in some way incomplete [a moving picture: “I am talking to you!” “I kept pulling on the handle.”]
- **aoristic aspect:** presents the action as a bare fact or as occurring in the blink of an eye [a snapshot: “I graduated.” “He blinked.”]
- **perfect aspect:** presents an action which was completed at some point in the past but is viewed from the standpoint of the present, often with the sense of some enduring result. [“I have read the book (and can now answer your question).” “I have decided what is to be done.”] In Greek, the perfect aspect often refers to the subject’s present state: *τέθνηκα* (“I have died”) = “I am dead.”

The difficulty with all of this is that the two systems (and their terminology) overlap: rather than having a separate form of each verb to indicate every possible combination of tense and aspect, Greek offers a potentially confusing and incomplete mixture of the two (especially when it comes to the progressive and aoristic aspects). Thus, if you examine the translations presented under “tense” above, you will find that the present and future tenses can be translated in either the aoristic or progressive aspect (“I love” and “I am loving”; “I will love” and “I will be loving”), while the aorist generally appears only as a past tense, with no distinct present-tense or future forms. (On the other hand, the imperfect tense is always progressive in aspect, while the perfect, future perfect, and pluperfect tenses are always perfect in aspect.)

In general, you should keep in mind that the term “tense” is usually employed as a form of shorthand for this mixture of tense + aspect.²

Mood

- indicative
- imperative
- subjunctive
- optative

The **indicative mood** operates in the realm of fact: it is the form used when the speaker wishes to indicate that something is or is not the case. (He/she might in fact be wrong, or even be lying, but, so far as the grammar of the sentence is concerned, he/she is asserting the truth of the statement. In the case of questions, he/she is asking whether something is in fact the case.) As you can imagine, the indicative is by far the most common of the moods.

The **imperative mood** operates in the realm of will: it is the form used when the speaker wishes to compel someone else to do something. (“Brush your teeth!” “Eat your vegetables!”)

The **subjunctive mood** is more difficult to pin down, but generally speaking it is the mood of generalization and contingency. It is employed when the speaker wishes to indicate that something might happen at some point, or generally happens, or is something that someone is attempting to do or is afraid might happen.

The **optative mood** operates at still a farther remove from actuality than the subjunctive. It is the mood of potentiality (what could be the case), hypothesis (no matter how far-fetched), and wish.

¹ This is often referred to as the imperfective aspect.

² In particular, you should be aware that when we refer to the “present tense” of, e.g., an imperative or infinitive, we are actually discussing the progressive form of those words: the association with tense has become so seemingly natural as to lead us misrepresent the nature and function of those forms.

Voice

- active
- passive
- middle

In the active voice, the subject performs the action indicated by the verb, while in the passive voice the subject is the passive recipient of the action (the difference between “I love” and “I am loved”; “I kill” and “I am killed”).³

The **middle voice** is somewhat more tricky. It generally indicates that the speaker is performing the action in his or her own interest or (in a reflexive sense) upon him/herself.

Thus, for example, the active verb “to loosen or release” becomes, in the middle voice, “to ransom” (i.e., to get someone released); the active verb “to write” becomes, in the middle voice, “to have something written down” (e.g., by a slave) or “to indict” (i.e., to get someone registered as being subject to a formal prosecution). Often the switch from the active voice to the middle involves a switch from a transitive sense to a reflexive sense: from, e.g., “I wash (someone or something else)” to “I wash myself.”

As you can see, the use of the middle voice is highly subjective. Sometimes the middle form will have a very particular nuance (as in the examples above); at other times it will merely indicate the speaker’s personal investment in the action. Many verbs, however, employ the middle voice for no apparent reason, as an inherited element of the language.

³ Technically, only verbs that have an active, transitive form should employ the passive voice (as in my examples above). Greek — like English — often cheats in this regard, however.

Morphology

Having seen something of how the Greek verb functions, it is time to consider how it is formed.

So far as morphology is concerned, there are two types of verbs in Greek: **thematic** (or “regular”) forms, and **athematic** (or “irregular”) forms.

Thematic Forms

For each finite verbal form, a particular verb stem has a **personal ending** attached to it. The stem indicates the tense/aspect and mood, while the ending indicates the person, number, and voice.

The personal endings for active verbs are:

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	—, -μι	-μεν
2nd Person	-ς [-σι]	-τε
3rd Person	-σι [-τι]	-ουσι [-ντι]

Forming the present tense of the indicative mood of active thematic verbs is a matter of attaching these personal endings to the present tense stem.

The **present tense stem** of thematic verbs, in turn, consists of a combination of a **verbal stem + theme vowel**. For the indicative mood, this theme vowel is *ο/ε*.

Thus, producing the various active forms of the present indicative of the verb λύω is in theory merely a matter of attaching the relevant personal endings to the tense stem λυ-ο/ε-. The result:

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	λύ - ο - [] → λύ - ω ⁴	λύ - ο - μεν
2nd Person	λύ - ε - σι → λύ - εις ⁵	λύ - ε - τε
3rd Person	λύ - ε - τι → λύ - ει ⁶	λύ - ο - ουσι → λύ - ουσι(ν) ⁷

In practice, you need only memorize the end product:

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	λύω	λύομεν
2nd Person	λύεις	λύετε
3rd Person	λύει	λύουσι(ν)

The process of working through the different persons and numbers of a verb is referred to as **conjugating** the verb. (Note: the term “**conjugation**” indicates a “yoking together” of the verb stem with the personal endings.)

⁴ In the first-person singular, the theme vowel *ο* is merely lengthened.

⁵ This form seems to entail the dropping of an intervocalic sigma (λύ - ε - σι → λύ - ε - ι) and the addition of a (redundant? compensatory?) final sigma.

⁶ Just how λυ-ε-τι becomes λυ-ει remains somewhat obscure.

⁷ The alteration of -ουσ- to -ουσ- is regular.

Contract Verbs

A sub-category of thematic verb is provided by the so-called contract verbs — verbs that have a verbal stem that ends in *a*, *ε*, or *ο*. In conjugating these verbs, Attic Greek routinely contracts the vowel at the end of the stem with the combination of the theme vowel and personal ending.

Thus the *ε*-contract verbs conjugate as follows in the present indicative active:

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	φιλ-έ-ω → φιλω̂	φιλ-έ-ομεν → φιλοῦμεν
2nd Person	φιλ-έ-εις → φιλεῖς	φιλ-έ-ετε → φιλεῖτε
3rd Person	φιλ-έ-ει → φιλεῖ	φιλ-έ-ουσι(ν) → φιλοῦσι(ν)

Athematic Forms

The athematic or irregular verbs (many of which are referred to as the *μ*-verbs) generally omit the use of a theme vowel. They also frequently admit variations in the stem.

The stem for the present indicative of the verb εἰμί (“I am”) is ἐσ-. The personal endings are attached directly to this stem as follows:

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	ἐσ-μι → εἰμί	ἐσ-μέν
2nd Person	ἐσ-σι → εἶ	ἐσ-τέ
3rd Person	ἐσ-τί(ν)	ἐσ-ντί → εἰσί(ν)

Yielding:

	Singular	Plural
1st Person	εἰμί	ἐσμέν
2nd Person	εἶ	ἐστέ
3rd Person	ἐστί(ν)	εἰσί(ν)

Again, the process by which some of these contractions occur is a bit obscure: when the time comes, you need only memorize the end product!